

6-14-06

Dear Conservation Committee Members,

I have grave concerns with the recently passed Senate Bill 1105 (Hunter Apprentice) that serves to circumvent established and successful Hunter Safety Certification for young children of Michigan in the desire to expediently remove "barriers" to recruitment and retention of more hunters in the state.

Over the last 15 years as a founding member of several Outdoor Youth Education camps, most recently MSC Camp Wilderness, I have taught Hunter Safety and Bowhunter Education to youths ages 11-15 and wholeheartedly believe that a comprehensive certification curriculum is absolutely essential before entertaining the notion of putting a lethal weapon into their young hands.

More importantly, our staff can verify that many of our students come to camp with incorrect prior safety instruction from their own family members which we are required to "un-teach" before moving forward. The Mentor/Apprentice program fails to recognize several extremely important issues. First, this bill assumes that the Mentor will be capable of providing correct, "on the spot" instruction that ensures a safe experience for all involved (please remember, that innocent third parties in the next woodlot should be considered as "involved"). It also assumes that the Mentor will cover the absolute bare minimum gun handling awareness points that include loading, unloading, safety manipulation, pointing, carrying, fence crossing, target identification and potential down range risks such as buildings or vehicles or people. It further assumes that the mentor will be able to come to the immediate aid of not one, but two apprentices at once without providing a clear definition of how far away the mentor can be from each child. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the Mentor cannot look through the sights of the weapon the child is using to determine within a split second if the shot is safe to take, nor does it provide the mentor with enough time to determine if the untrained shot placement will dispatch the animal responsibly instead of inflicting a wound that will cause a slow, painful and lingering death. Nothing will cause greater damage to retention than the thought of a gut shot animal suffering unfound in a far off swamp.

I have reviewed information used by the Senate proponents of this bill such as the Families Afield organization, which uses statistics to alarm our elected officials that Michigan has the worst recruitment and retention rates in the country and that SOMETHING must be done about it immediately. This same group cites studies that demonstrate that hunting is safer than most other sports and reports hunting accident percentages that lead decision makers to believe that accidents virtually NEVER occur when an adult accompanies a young hunter. One statistic implied that less than one accident per million youth participants takes place (no time frame was associated with their study), yet in Michigan alone last year, fully 18% of the total accidents occurring, involved youths 12-17 years old (4). If the Families Afield data is correct, then

approximately 20 percent of all injuries in America last year occurred in Michigan even after the participants had received certified hunter safety instruction and were accompanied by licenced adult hunters. It seem particularly irresponsible to me that our leadership would not recognize that circumventing hunter safety might cause that statistic to increase, not decrease, regardless of Families Afield's documentation to the contrary.

These studies seem to make convenient use of data and do not take into account that Michigan has one of the highest hunter densities in the country, along with one of the largest holdings of public hunting land east of the Mississippi river. It may not occur to some Senators that there is a distinct difference between statistics developed reviewing children hunting on 11,000-acre private leases in Texas versus the 20-acre back woodlots of Michigan.

This rush to potential disaster seems to stem from a recent DNR Hunting Recruitment and Retention committee task force that examined ways to encourage more hunters to join the noticeably dwindling ranks Michigan hunters. In review of their draft documents and after discussion with more than one citizen member, at no time did the group believe that children should be taken afield without Hunter Safety nor did they agree to allow these children to be immediately unattended as the vague language in SB 1105 allows.

One can only assume that our Senate is willing to forsake the safety of our children and innocent bystanders for one reason, to put more license fees into the system. I can think of no other reason to try to make it 'easier' for young people to go afield. We don't let young children drive cars without certified instruction and testing. They don't have the maturity to practice on the road first, take training second. Neither do young hunters.

Some might argue that my assumption that license fees are not at the heart of this matter and to that I suggest that if it wasn't, why didn't Senator McManus's bill make these apprentice licenses free instead?

In reality, the key to hunter recruitment and retention lay not with removing safety "hindrances" but rather in the hunting experience itself. If the DNR and the Michigan Senate are interested in recruiting new hunters, they need to be willing to understand that children will be excited and encouraged by the success of their peers. If their best friend went hunting and shot a deer, they will want to join him. They will retain him as a long-term hunter when he too sees a viable population of deer and has the opportunity to join in his friend's success. Eliminating or postponing the safety requirement is a shortsighted and dangerous remedy that doesn't begin to address the real problem with recruitment and retention. It's simply a case of doing "something" instead of the right thing.

Before making your decision to move this bill out of committee ask yourselves if you would allow your untrained grandchild aged 10, to pick up a shotgun and venture out into the woods with the neighbor guy down the street. Ask yourself why on earth would you would not want to make sure that your grandchild had the minimum certified training before being allowed to point and shoot a lethal weapon. Is this certification a "barrier"

to recruitment or a shield of protection against careless and un-necessary accidents and mortality. You choose. Please choose wisely.

Respectfully,

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